

Immanuel Kant

Rationality, Reason, and Ethics

Immanuel Kant

- Born April 22 1724, Königsberg, Kingdom of Prussia. (Now the city of Kaliningrad, Russia)
- Died Feb. 12 1804, Königsberg.
- Never married, rarely set foot outside his hometown.
- An unexceptional student, (he lived partially off pool winnings) Kant eventually published his dissertation (The Critique of Pure Reason!) and attained the chair of logic and metaphysics at the University of Königsberg. In his 50's he began writing the texts (aside from the already published Critique) that would make him the last, and one of the greatest philosophers of the enlightenment.

Immanuel Kant

- “Two things awe me most, the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.”
- "Seek not the favor of the multitude; it is seldom got by honest and lawful means. But seek the testimony of few; and number not voices, but weigh them."
- "If man makes himself a worm he must not complain when he is trodden on."

Immanuel Kant

- We will be working our way through the basic ideas in Kant's

“Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten”
(publ. 1785)

AKA the

“Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals”

Initial Definitions

- An Epistemological distinction.
 - A posteriori knowledge: knowledge we have as a result of some sensory experience of the world.
 - Examples: The sky is blue.
 - Slamming your hand in the door is painful.
 - A priori knowledge: knowledge we have simply due to rational reflection with no input from the sensory world.
 - Examples: $2 + 2 = 4$
 - Logic- Modus Ponens and Modus Tollens

Initial Definitions

- Kant divides philosophy into 3 main areas:
 - Logic- The Laws of Thought. Purely **A priori**.
 - Physics- The Laws of Nature. Combined **A posteriori** and **A priori**.
 - Ethics- The Laws of Freedom. Combined **A posteriori** and **A priori**.

Initial Definitions

- Ethics and the A priori:
 - Experience and sensation (**A posteriori** knowledge) only teaches us how things are, not how they should be. *So the fundamental moral judgments that impart normative value must be A priori.*
 - Applying those values to the real world, however, requires **A posteriori** knowledge.
 - Hence the study of Ethics is a combination A priori and A posteriori knowledge. But we will be concentrating on fundamental moral knowledge of the A priori kind.

Initial Definitions

- A priori or A posteriori?
 - “Don’t stab anyone!”
 - The Stabiphile case.
 - “Don’t harm anyone!”
 - True by definition.

Kant's "Groundwork"

- Section 1 of the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals proposes to take a common sense view of morality and extract from it a theory of fundamental, unconditional, intrinsic value. Or as Kant says:
 - “to proceed analytically from common cognition to the determination of its supreme principle.”

Kant's "Groundwork"

- The common sense thought he begins with is something like this: "A person who does the right thing for the right reason evinces a certain sort of value."
- Kant claims what that person evinces is a "good will."

Kant & “The Good Will”

- Good Will Claim 1.
- “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.” (p. 7).

Kant & “The Good Will”

- Is it true there is nothing in the world with unconditional value but a “good will?”
- A possible response: “We value other things for themselves, such as health, or happiness!”
- It is true that we value these things for themselves, but it is not true that these things hold positive value in all conditions. The health and happiness of a mass murderer are not positive things. Yet if that mass murderer were somehow able, at some point in his life, to evince a good will, it would still be valuable.

Kant & “The Good Will”

- Further questions about Good Will Claim 1.
 - 1)What is a will?
 - 2)What makes a good will good?

Kant & “The Good Will”

- Answer to 1):
- What the will *isn't*:
 - The will is not to be identified with our “talents of the mind”: wit, understanding, intelligence.
 - The will is not to be identified with what Kant calls our ‘temperament’: courage, resolve, heroism, etc.

Kant & “The Good Will”

- Answer to 1):
- What the will *is*:
 - The will is the making of rational plans and decisions, the adoption of policies and goals; *the will is the rational setting of ends.*
- So now we have come to the crux of the issue, at the bottom of all moral value, according to Kant, lies human rationality. *In fact, Kant claims that rationality creates all forms of normative value in the universe!*

Rationality & Imperatives

- Examples of normative value created by rationality:
 - Flint and steel are only valuable because steel makes good tools (valuable only insofar as they aid our **rational** plans and purposes) and together they can make fire (again, valuable only insofar as it aids our **rational** plans and purposes).
 - If you need a sharp knife you should make it of steel.
 - If you need to stay warm and cook food you should make a fire.
- These are called Imperatives, they point us toward the way the world should be.

Rationality & Imperatives

- These imperatives all begin with an “if” clause that sets the conditions under which flint and steel become valuable. These things therefore only have conditional value and the imperatives associated with them are also only conditional. They are conditional on us having the goals stated in the “if” clause.
- If you want to impress the teacher, pay attention and ask good questions.
- On the other hand if you don’t give a S#^t what the teacher thinks of you, by all means fall asleep.

Rationality & Imperatives

- Kant calls such imperatives “**Hypothetical Imperatives.**”
- Importantly, there is another kind of imperative we will discuss below. But for now we continue with Hypothetical Imperatives.
- The rational will is the source of all such conditional value. Without rational goals and plans, no such value would exist.
- **Therefore, the rational will itself is intrinsically valuable.**

Rationality & Imperatives

- Consider the following question:
 - If there are no rational beings in the universe, would there be any moral force (any moral normative value) in the universe?
 - No! Therefore, rationality is the source of all moral value as well as conditional practical value like that of steel and fire.

Kant & “The Good Will”

- Now we have uncovered the “will” as the rational setting of ends.
- We have also uncovered how the will is valuable, namely **intrinsically** as the source of all other value.
- But we still have question #2.
 - 2) What makes a good will good?

Kant & “The Good Will”

- According to Kant what differentiates a bad will from a good will is the motive from which it acts.
- Obviously the rational will can be used for evil purposes as well as good. But how do we differentiate, at an A priori level (without looking at the world and the effects of any particular willing or rational plan), when the motive for that plan is evil or good?

Kant & Duty

- Good Will Claim 2.
- A good will is a will that acts from Duty.
- “[W]e shall set before ourselves the concept of **duty**, which contains that of a good will, though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances which, however, far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly” (p. 10).

Huh????? What \$%*@ does that mean?

Kant & Duty

- **According to Kant there are 4 kinds of willing, only one of them good.**

1. Acts done *contrary to duty*.
2. Acts done *in accordance with duty* for an ulterior (non-moral) motive.
3. Acts done *in accordance with duty* from a benevolent inclination.
4. Acts done *from duty* (i.e. respect for the moral law).

Which one do you think is good from what we have learned so far?

Kant & Duty

- To explain how all these different types of good and bad rational “willing” work, Kant uses the example of a candy store shopkeeper considering how to treat his customers. Should he cheat them or not?

1. Ex. Of (1) Contrary to his duty the shopkeeper cheats Butters and gang (God help him 😊). Willing of this first type obviously isn't good.
2. Ex. of (2): Politician Shopkeeper. He knows he can cheat the kids, but he doesn't. The reason is that he doesn't like the possibility of it becoming known that he is dishonest. He does the "right thing" from an intention to appear moral, but not out of respect for the moral law
3. Ex. of (3): the Benevolent Shopkeeper: Takes pleasure in being nice. He knows he could cheat his customers, but loves kids, so he sells the Butters his candy at the correct price. He performs the act out of an intention to give himself pleasure by being nice/loving.
4. Ex. of (4): The Misanthropic Shopkeeper. Doesn't care about his reputation or kids. Instead he does the right thing only because it is the right thing to do, i.e., **out of respect for the moral law.**

Kant & Duty

- So a duty is the rational recognition of an ought, an imperative, *in the form of a law*. And acting correctly on that duty requires acting **from** that law/imperative.
- A law is an absolute and exception-less rule.
- An example would be: “If you want the townspeople to like you, don’t cheat their children.”
- But this can’t be the form of our fundamental moral duties! Why not?
- Our basic ethical duties cannot have a conditional “if” clause in front. Why not??

Rationality & Imperatives

- The fundamental laws of morality **must** deal with unconditional values.
- Morality doesn't say: "If you want your neighbors to like you, treat them ethically."
- It says: "Treat your neighbors ethically."
- This last imperative is not conditional, it is not a **Hypothetical Imperative**, but a **Categorical Imperative**!

Rationality & Imperatives

- Like the shopkeeper. We are not being properly moral if we follows laws like:
 - If you want the townspeople to like you don't cheat their children. Or,
 - If you enjoy it, be nice and don't cheat your customers.
 - These “Ifs,” these conditions on having to follow the law give the shopkeeper an escape hatch. If he doesn't care about the townspeople or children then the law doesn't forbid him from cheating them at all!
 - In order to be fully moral he must act from the following kind of law:
Don't cheat your customers!

Rationality & Imperatives

- Hypothetical Imperative: “If Z then do X.”
- Categorical Imperative “Do X.”
- The fundamental laws of morality must be of the latter kind because they bind everyone in all conditions!!!

Categorical Imperative

- Via the previous line of reasoning Kant is working his way toward The Kantian Categorical Imperative. This is the fundamental moral rule or principle that is:
 - 1.A priori- It must be discoverable through rationality alone.
 - 2.Unconditional- Its application does not depend on any conditions, it applies in all circumstances.
 - 3.Absolute- There are absolutely no exceptions to this rule!

Categorical Imperative

- I hope it is now clear why Kant considers Ethics a study of Laws, just like physics and logic. The fundamental moral law must guide all our actions.
- The only way to insure that we are acting morally in all cases is to insure that we are acting according to (and motivated by) a principle that is a **valid Law of the moral universe**.
- Hence the first **“Universal Law”** formulation of the Categorical Imperative.

Categorical Imperative

Universal Law Formulation

- “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become universal law.”

Categorical Imperative

Universal Law Formulation

- Along with the first formulation comes a procedure to test our plans and actions for their ethical acceptability.
 1. Formulate the maxim on which you are acting.
 2. Apply that maxim as a universal law.
 3. If there is a contradiction, then the action is impermissible.
 4. If there is no contradiction then the action is permissible.

Categorical Imperative

Universal Law Formulation

- Example of the test procedure:
- I need some ready cash, I can't pay it back, so I plan to lie on a loan application.
 1. Formulate maxim: "When I need cash I should simply lie to extract a loan."
 2. Apply maxim as universal law: "When anyone needs cash they should simply lie to extract a loan."
 3. Is there a contradiction????

Categorical Imperative

Universal Law Formulation

- Example of test procedure 2:
- I feel like blowing off studying but I still want an A on the final, so I will cheat.
 1. Formulate maxim: “When I can’t be bothered to study, I will cheat to get an A.”
 2. Apply maxim as universal law: “When anyone can’t be bothered to study, they will cheat and get an A.”
 3. Is there a contradiction????

Categorical Imperative

Kingdom of Ends Formulation

- Now that we are clear on the “Universal Law” formulation of the Categorical Imperative we will move on to Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative.
- Kant considers each formulation (there are 3, but we will skip the last one) to be equivalent to the others. This is controversial, but we will set that issue aside as well.
- The second formulation we will look at is called the “Kingdom of Ends” formulation. But before we introduce it, let’s learn a little about the reason Kant believes another formulation is needed.

Categorical Imperative

Kingdom of Ends Formulation

- Since it is our being motivated by the moral laws that makes us morally good (remember the shopkeeper), such laws have no authority over us unless it is possible for us to be motivated by them.
- All actions are motivated by some end or goal they seek to achieve. Sometimes this end is the action itself, (if it is a good one) or some further end.
- If the Categorical Imperative is to have authority over all moral actions then **there must be some end which it serves, and which is universally valued**. There must be something no one can deny the value of, and which is deeply connected to the categorical imperative.
- What might that thing be?

Categorical Imperative

Kingdom of Ends Formulation

- The answer of course is rationality, or more precisely the only form in which we see rationality instantiated in our world, humanity.
- Therefore Kant formulates the 2nd “Kingdom of Ends” formulation of the Categorical Imperative in terms of the absolute value of human moral agents.

Categorical Imperative

Kingdom of Ends Formulation

- “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person, or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means.”

Categorical Imperative

Kingdom of Ends Formulation

- “Respecting someone as an end means respecting her right to make her own decisions about her own life and actions. This leads to particularly strong injunctions against coercion and deception.” Christine Korsgaard. Introduction to the “groundwork.”
- “Obligations arise from, and so can only be traced to, the human capacity for self-government.” Christine Korsgaard. Introduction to the “groundwork.”

Categorical Imperative

Problems and Objections

- Both formulations of the categorical imperative have some major problems.
- Problems with the first formulation:
 - It allows too much. For example consider really specific laws.
 - Phil 4 instructor session B 2009 case.
 - This might be able to be addressed by constraining how one formulates the maxim of one's action.

Categorical Imperative

Problems and Objections

- The first formulation also seems to disallow too much in certain circumstances.
- Consider the following maxim: “Leave the Laker game 15 minutes early to avoid traffic.”
- Or: “Always eat lunch at Subway.”
 - This might be addressed by restricting tested maxims to ones with real moral import?

Categorical Imperative

Problems and Objections

- Problems with the second “Kingdom of Ends” formulation.
- Creates very strict rules against deception and coercion, according to Kant it means that “do not lie” is a valid, universal exceptionless rule.
- Murderer at the door case.
- Or the girlfriend question.
 - Perhaps this can be addressed by softening Kant’s own interpretation in some way to allow for such cases.

Deontology Today

- Despite its age and despite its issues, Kant's Deontological moral theory has spawned a long a fruitful tradition of moral theorizing. The idea that ethics is the exclusive fruit of rational minds is a powerful one.
- For example: two key concepts in modern moral discourse the importance of which can be traced back to Kant:
 - **Rights** (rational beings are intrinsically valuable, and as such have inalienable rights)
 - **Autonomy** (any rational being's capacity for self-governance is intrinsically valuable, and therefore should be respected)
- That is not to say these weren't important concepts before, but Kant has given us the paradigmatic explanation of their importance, and our modern usage of them both in philosophy and in normal discourse owes much to his work.

Kingdom of Ends

- So according to Kant, morality is:
 - “the noble ideal of a universal kingdom or ends in themselves (rational beings) to which we can belong as members only when we carefully conduct ourselves in accordance with maxims of freedom as if they were laws of nature.”

Deontology Today

- Our next task is to take the normative theories of Kantian Deontology and examine a modern application of them to a deep modern moral problem.

Next

- Next we will turn to our reader and read Judith Jarvis Thomson's classic paper "A Defense of Abortion."